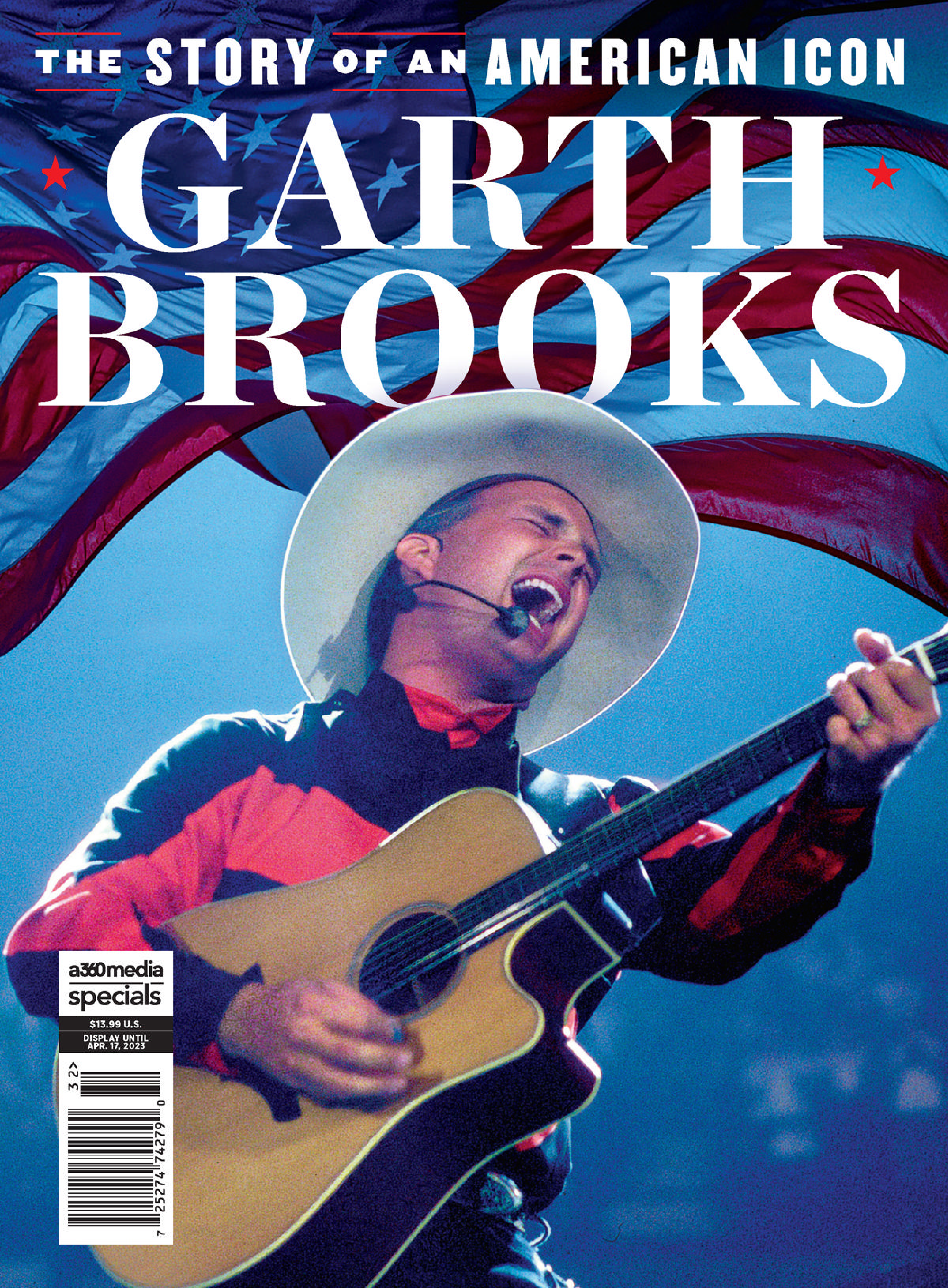
THE STORY OF AN AMERICAN ICON

GARTH BROOKS



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★ GARTH ★ BROOKS

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IN THIS TEMPLE
AS IN THE HEARTS OF THE PEO
FOR WHOM HE SAVED THE UN
THE MEMORY OF ABRAHAM LINC
IS ENSHRINED FOREVER

PERSEVERE

UNSTOPPABLE
On May 26, 2004, Brooks performed in New York City's Times Square for the broadcast of the 39th CMA Awards.

WHY WE LOVE GARTH BROOKS

The good times he creates come from how he feels onstage

During the COVID-19 pandemic, Garth Brooks locked down at his home in Nashville, Tennessee. He spent time with his family, took care of his property on a tractor and thought about his fans, and his brothers and sisters in music. He took a moment, in other words, to search his soul. And what he found was an understanding of the things he cherished most about his record-setting career.

"Getting to play music goes so beyond anything that's got to do with making money," Brooks explained tearfully in a 2020 interview with *Billboard*. "You kind of need to find that out, because in this business, they overpay you. I miss it so badly. I miss the people. I miss the band and crew. But I miss what happens when the people and the band and crew all get together. That beautiful two hours. It feels like three minutes. It's just fabulous."

From his early days as a college athlete turned bar-band singer, to his meteoric rise in the 1990s, to his current life as a country music icon, Brooks has never lost his gratitude for being able to perform. He considers making music an honor and a privilege, a special kind of love he shares with audiences around the world whenever he approaches a microphone.

Brooks has been rewarded with astonishing record sales, sold-out concerts, and enduring respect from his fans for the choices he's made along the way. It hasn't always been easy. But for Garth and the people who love his music, it has always been worth it.

Back on the road in 2022, Brooks said that his personal goal at each show was to make people love each other more after the concert than they had before. That's exactly the kind of thoughtful perspective that has made Garth Brooks one of the most legendary–and beloved—performers of all time.

SHOE STORE COWBOY
Wearing a pair of Asics instead of cowboy boots, Brooks poses for a portrait with his guitar while perched atop a Nashville fence line on Aug. 15, 1991.

CROWD CONNECTION Brooks and his fans rock out during a show in Minneapolis on Feb. 23, 1994. It was part of his first world tour, which was in support of his 1993 album *In Pieces*.

SHOW OF HANDS
During his surprise set on the first day of the CMA Music Festival in Nashville on June 8, 2017, Brooks proves that he has friends in both low and high places.

CMA
Fest

Fender
TELECASTER

SIX-STRING STRUMMER
Brooks was feeling the music while performing at the iHeartRadio Music Awards—which honored him as Artist of the Decade—in Los Angeles on March 14, 2019.

CAPITAL COUNTRY
Flanked by members of his band, Brooks (center) plays at the Library of Congress Gershwin Prize tribute concert in Washington, D.C., on March 4, 2020.

CHAPTER 1

A former student-athlete, Garth Brooks was focused on success

THE EARLY YEARS

A smiling Brooks in 1970, when he was a second-grader at Yukon Elementary School in Yukon, Oklahoma. He was still two decades away from becoming the next big thing in country music.

CHAPTER 1

★ ★ ★

WILD WILLIE'S SALOON

sits on a section of Washington Street in Stillwater, Oklahoma, known to locals as The Strip. The Strip wasn't as rowdy as it had been before the drinking age was raised to 21, but in the mid-1980s, it captured some of its old energy on nights when a local led his band through a four-hour set mixing country hits with classic rock favorites. He sported long hair and a baseball cap, and he often ended the night by leading the crowd through a sing-along of Don McLean's "American Pie." He got paid $100 for each gig. His name was Garth Brooks, and by the end of the decade, he would be the hottest singer in country music.

Brooks had come to Stillwater to attend Oklahoma State University, where he'd thrown the javelin before graduating in 1984. He grew up in nearby Yukon, raised by a mother, Colleen, who had sung on ABC's *Ozark Jubilee* in the 1950s, and a father, Raymond, who worked for the Union 76 oil company. As a kid, Brooks' favorite musicians included James Taylor, Queen, George Jones and Merle Haggard. A poster of the band KISS hung on his bedroom wall.

Brooks' first dream was to become a professional athlete. In football, he was good enough to win the starting quarterback job at Yukon High. He started taking country music seriously when he heard George Strait's "Unwound" on the radio in his dad's car. After that he became, by his own admission, "a George wannabe."

HOOP DREAMS
As an eighth-grader on the Yukon Junior High basketball team in 1976, Brooks (right, 40) dreamed more of a career in sports than he did of one in music.

YUKON
43
YUKON
40
YUKON
34

Yukon
9
20
Yukon

YUKON GOLD
Brooks went from a skinny eighth-grader at Yukon Junior High (left, top) to a bulky junior in 1979 at Yukon High, where he played baseball (left, bottom, 20).

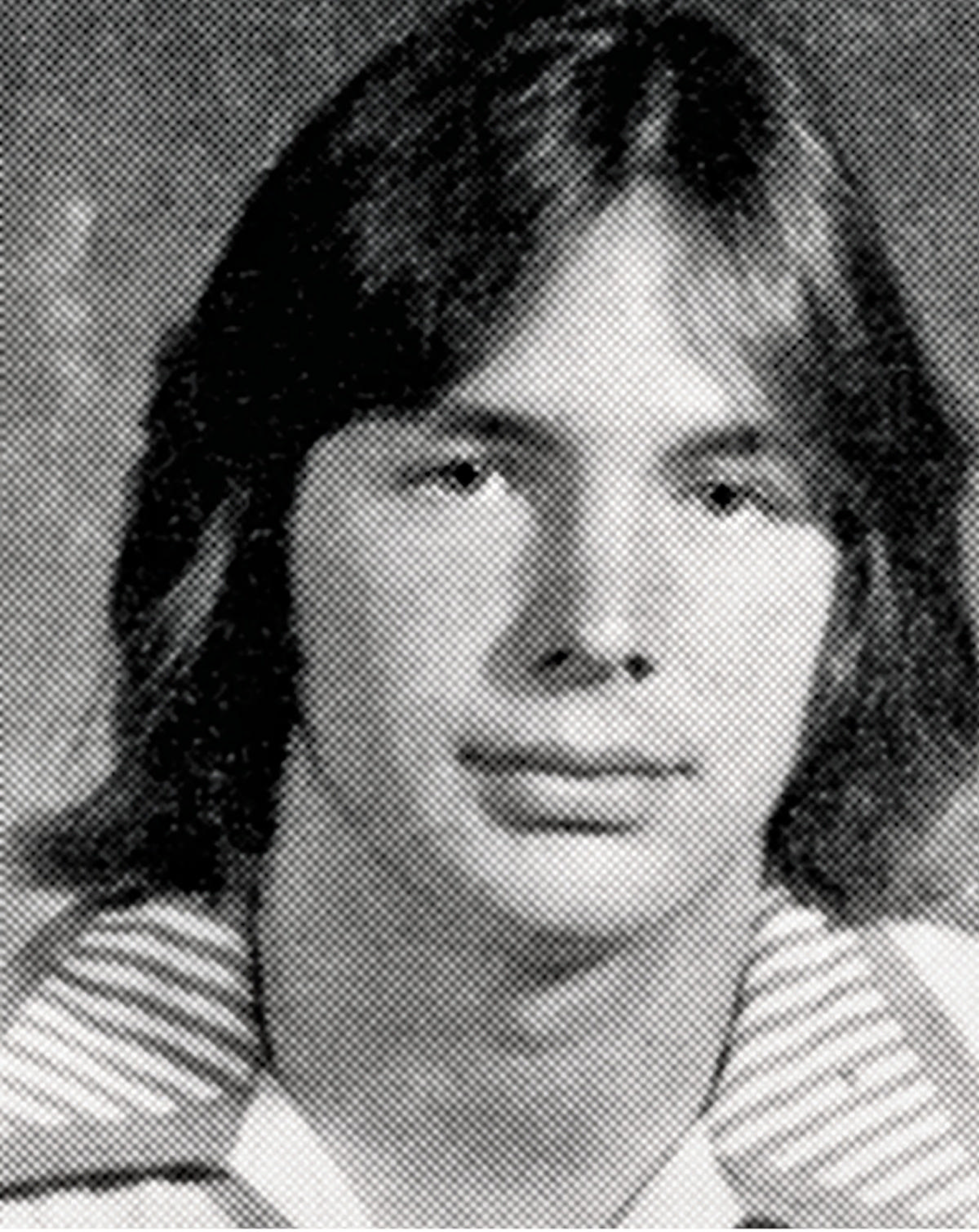
STRAIT FACE
Brooks was still all about sports as a junior (right), but everything changed when he heard George Strait's "Unwound" on the radio.

> "HIS FIRST DREAM WAS TO BECOME A PROFESSIONAL ATHLETE."

"When I heard George Strait in the early '80s, that was it," he remembered. "I said, There's my way: country music."

The path of an aspiring country musician inevitably leads to Nashville. Brooks first tried to make it there in 1985, leaving behind Wild Willie's and his day job at DuPree's Sporting Goods. "I thought you'd come here, flip open your guitar case, play a song and someone would hand you a million bucks," he later remembered. It didn't quite work out that way: He got a meeting at ASCAP, an association for songwriters and publishers, but the person he met with sent him back home with his tail between his legs.

He'd be back. Brooks stayed in Oklahoma until 1987. His new band, Santa Fe, had graduated to a venue called Norm's Country Ballroom, and on his final night onstage the owner, Norm, promised Brooks that he was going to become "the biggest damn thing" in country music. But in Nashville, even the next big thing has to work his way up. Brooks' rise seemed to be happening slowly—until it was really fast. He continued to get rejected by record labels, but he was picking up gigs singing on songwriters'



FOOTBALL FOLLIES
As a senior in 1979 at Yukon High, Brooks (far right, with coach Milt Bassett) was the starting quarterback for the Millers. But Bassett benched him after the team's 0–5 start.

demo tapes and in commercials for such companies as John Deere and Lone Star Beer.

His break came at the legendary Bluebird Cafe. After sending an audition tape, Brooks was chosen to perform at a showcase that would be attended by industry insiders, including Lynn Shults of Capitol Records. Shults had recently passed on the young singer, but when he heard Brooks sing "Tomorrow Never Comes" in front of a crowd, he knew he'd made a mistake. The next day, he went to the office and insisted that the label sign Garth Brooks.

In April 1989, Brooks released his self-titled debut on Capitol Records. "Much Too Young (To Feel This Damn Old)," the first single, had been a staple of his live shows in Oklahoma.

"I wanted a George Jones hard-country feel with a Dan Fogelberg or James Taylor orientation toward lyrics," Brooks told the *Chicago Tribune*. "If the songs were funny, I wanted them to be clever, and if they were serious I wanted them to be real deep, to reach in there and try to grab you by the heart."

Years later, he still gets butterflies hearing the record: "Every time I hear those songs off the radio or off the album itself, or even when we play them live, I really get that same kind of scared feeling that I had way back in 1988 and 1989."

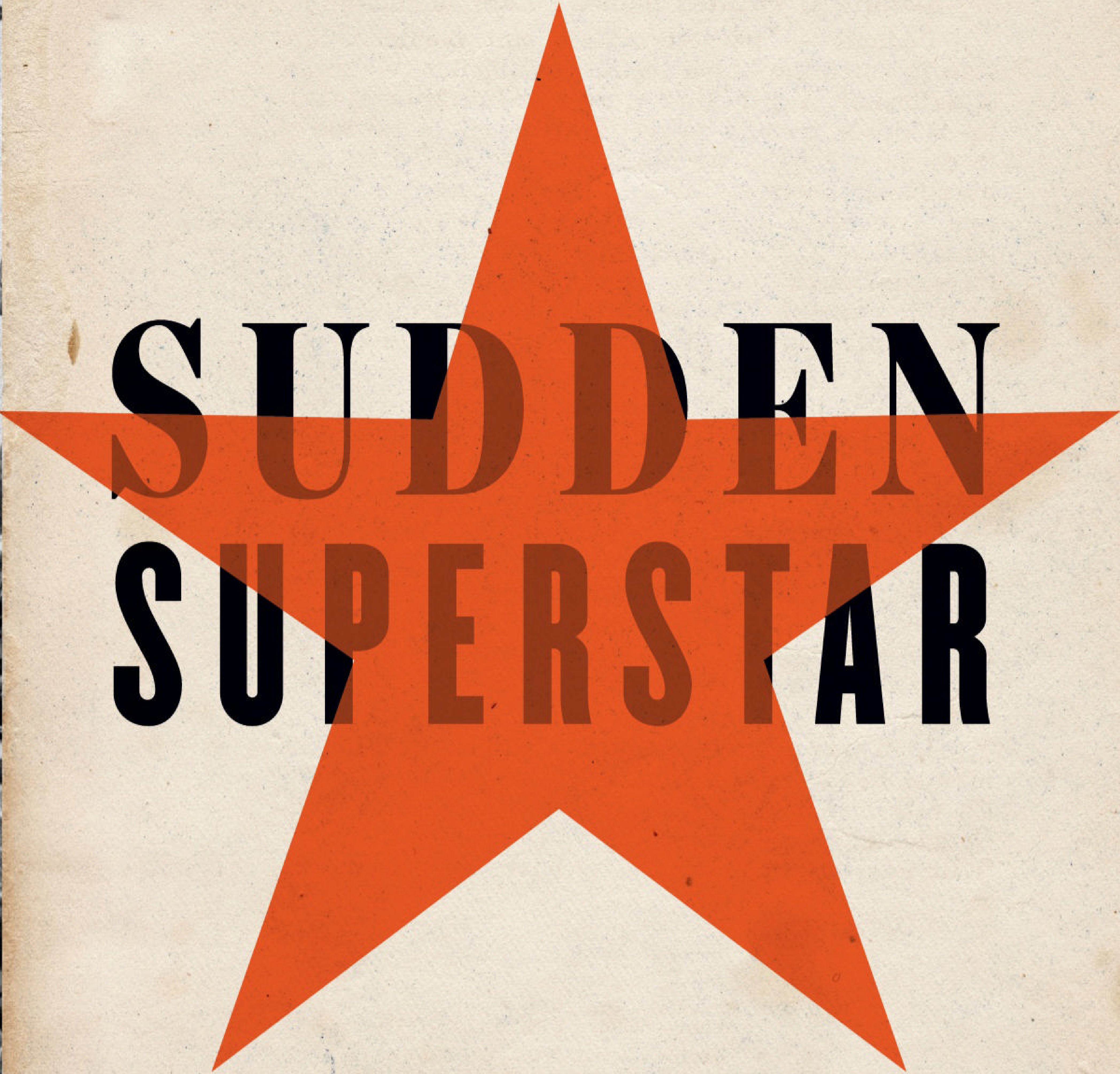
MUSIC BOX
Brooks struggled in Nashville at first, but he got his break at the Bluebird Cafe (below), where he played a show for industry insiders, including a Capitol Records executive.

A BIG HAND
On Nov. 27, 1989—seven months after the release of his self-titled debut—Brooks met in Nashville with Columbia Records executive Jim Foglesong (far right).

Green Hills Barber Shop
The Bluebird Cafe
PARKING

CHAPTER 2

Right off the bat, Brooks struck a chord

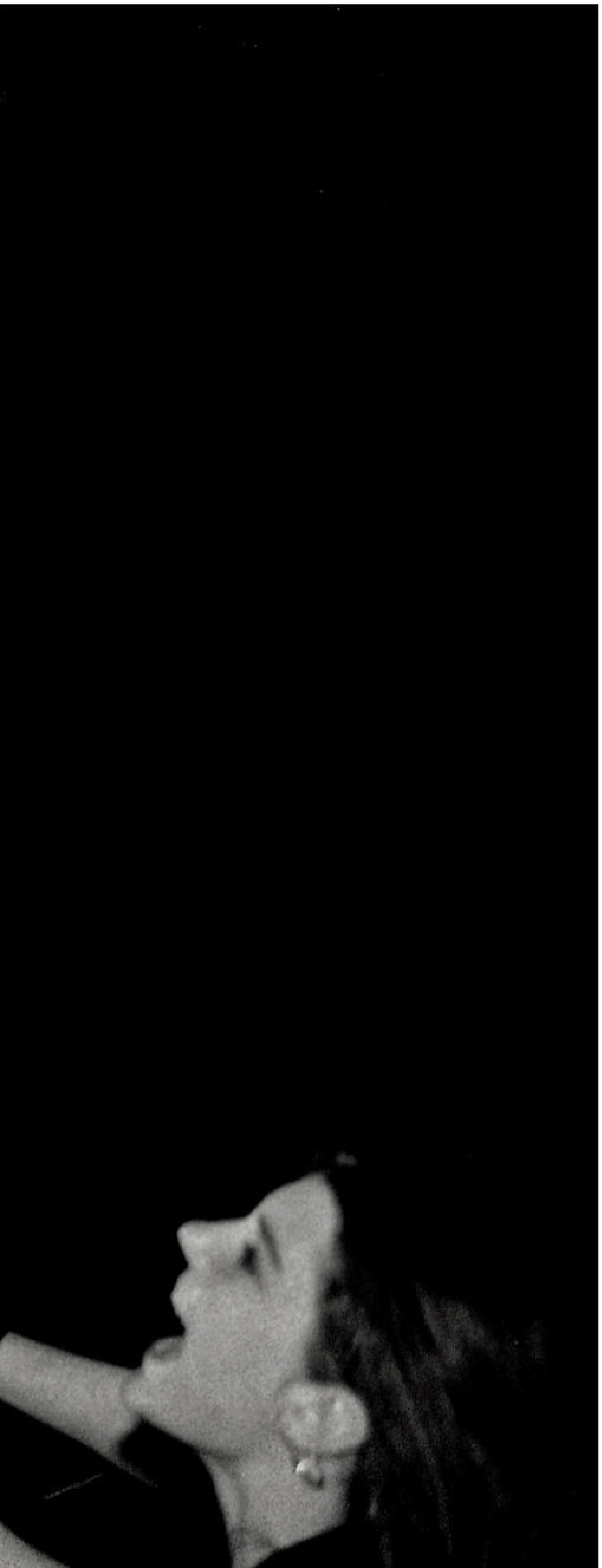


SUDDEN SUPERSTAR

Around the time he posed for this 1990 portrait in Los Angeles, Brooks had a lot to celebrate: His second album, *No Fences,* was on its way to becoming the bestselling country record of all time.

MUSIC MAN
With his rock 'n' roll take on country music, Brooks won over young and old fans alike—and not just in the U.S. Below, he performs onstage in London in 1990.

CHAPTER 2



DEBBIE RABORN, the general manager of Carson City, Nevada, radio station KBUL-FM, called it “Garthmania” after her station received 80,000 calls when it announced it was giving away tickets to a 1992 Garth Brooks concert. “I’ve been in this business 18 years and I’ve never seen anything like it.”

Brooks’ eponymous 1989 debut sold more than 10 million copies, an enormous amount by any standard except that of his second album, *No Fences*, which—since its August 1990 release—has sold more than 18 million. Emerging from the “neo-traditionalist” era of the early to mid-1980s, country radio felt open to new sounds and new ideas—and was looking to bring in new audiences. The time was exactly right, in other words, for Brooks’ rock twist on classic country.

“If the Eagles came out today with some of their early ’70s stuff—‘Lyin’ Eyes,’ ‘Take It Easy,’ stuff like that—what format would they be in? I think it might be country,” Brooks told *Rolling Stone*. “If we don’t cut ourselves up into progressive country, traditional country, new country, if we just play country music as a family, staying sincere and honest, I don’t see this ride ever ending.”

Songs like “The Dance” and “If Tomorrow Never Comes” described the everyday feelings of real people. And when fans met the singer himself, they found a man who was just as approachable as his music.

“I am just a mirror of them,” Brooks said of his fans. “Maybe they see themselves in me ... and they

YULETIDE TRIO
At a 1990 Christmas benefit in Universal City, California, Brooks got between the mother-daughter duo of Naomi (near left) and Wynonna Judd.

STAR SUPPORT
Brooks made a name for himself with his live shows even when he was opening for such headliners as Kenny Rogers (right, top) and Reba McEntire (right, bottom).

> “
> **IT WAS BROOKS’ LIVE SHOW … THAT TRULY SET HIM APART FROM HIS PEERS.**
> ”

say, ‘Hey, you don’t have to be this ungodly person to make your mark on life. You just got to be yourself.’”

It was Brooks’ live show, an athletic spectacle worthy of the biggest arena rock acts, that truly set him apart from his peers. Wearing his signature headset mike, the singer sprinted across the stage like a football free safety. He kept the energy high, and he reached out to his fans—both literally and figuratively. It all went back to the KISS poster on his bedroom wall. “When I went to see Kansas and Queen and Styx, I don’t even remember the music,” he recalled. “But I know what I saw.”

Opening for such artists as Kenny Rogers, the Judds and Reba McEntire, he inspired awe not just from the crowds, but also his fellow performers. “He was so outlandish, so far beyond anything anybody did on stage,” McEntire said. “I thought it was weird, but I thought, it’s classy, different, unique, and he’s going to be a big star.”

Not long after the release of *Garth Brooks*, Jimmy Bowen, another executive who had once passed on giving him a deal, was promoted to the head of Capitol Nashville. When he saw Garth live, he too was

“BOWEN WANTED A NEW ALBUM THAT CAPTURED THE ENERGY OF BROOKS ONSTAGE.”

STAGE SHOW
Brooks (center) and his band perform onstage in Dallas during the *This Is Garth Brooks* concert special that aired on NBC on Dec. 26, 1991.

blown away. At the show Bowen attended, the singer went into the crowd, held up a baby and sang "Tomorrow Never Comes" as if it were a lullaby. Bowen wanted a new album that captured the energy of Brooks onstage.

This was the beginning of *No Fences*, which eventually became the bestselling country album of all time. (Only Shania Twain's *Come on Over* has since outdone it.) Brooks calls it "the people's favorite album." For the album's signature song, "Friends in Low Places," the singer took Bowen's advice literally, inviting friends and family into the studio to record background vocals. The sound of a beer can opening can even be heard off mike.

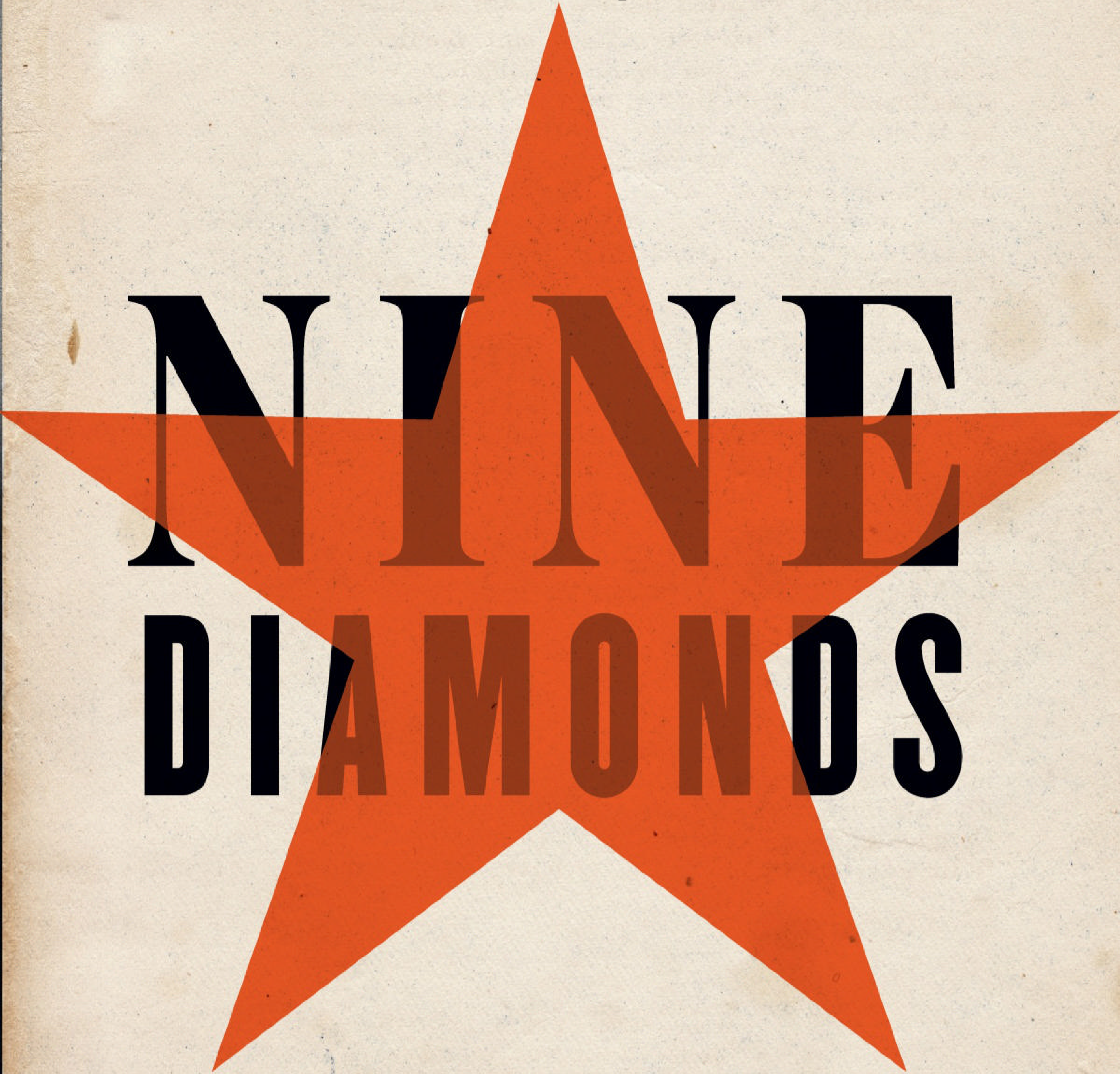
By the summer of 1990, Garth had officially become the next big thing in country music. In June, at the CMA's Fan Fair, he hosted an autograph session that lasted for several hours without a break. (At the 1996 Fan Fair, he'd extend that to 23 straight hours without a break.) Onstage at the Nashville Speedway, he was presented with a gold record commemorating 500,000 sales of his debut album. Then in August, *No Fences* arrived in stores. When CMA Award nominations were announced the same month, Brooks had earned more than any other artist in country music.

RECORD SETTERS
After seeing Brooks play live, Columbia exec Jimmy Bowen (above, left) asked him to make an album that captured that energy. The result was the blockbuster *No Fences.*

OUTSIDE THE FIRE
For his second NBC special, 1994's *This Is Garth Brooks, Too!*, Brooks returned to Dallas—where his onstage pyrotechnics were on full display.

CHAPTER 3

Brooks is the only artist in music history with nine albums that have sold more than 10 million copies in the United States



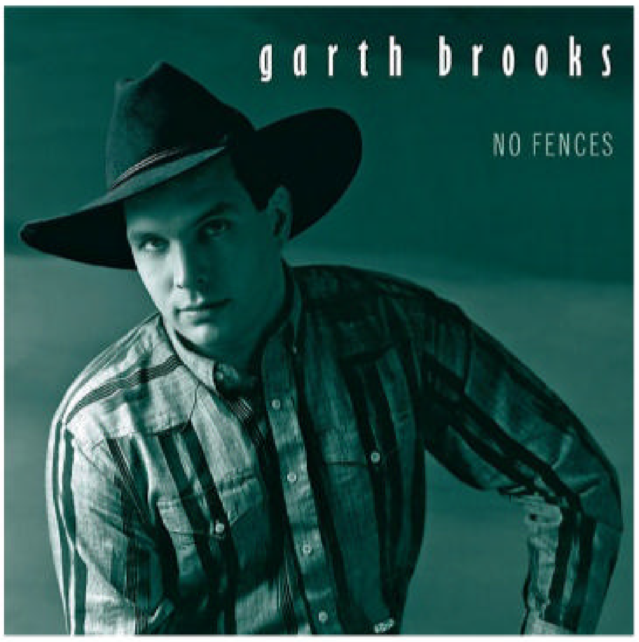
NINE DIAMONDS

Brooks turns the spotlight on a Nashville crowd—and why shouldn't he? His legion of devoted fans deserve some recognition for making him one of the bestselling artists in the history of music.

COUNTRY CAUSE
On April 7, 1990, four months before the release of *No Fences*, Brooks performed onstage during Farm Aid in Indianapolis.

garth brooks

1. *Garth Brooks*, 1989
The album that started it all. Brooks had a hand in writing five of the record's 10 songs, including "Much Too Young (To Feel This Damn Old)" and "If Tomorrow Never Comes." This was by design: He wanted to make himself accessible to Nashville's songwriting community so that talented writers wouldn't hesitate to pitch him their best tunes.



2. *No Fences*, 1990
Brooks' bestselling album. He felt confident in it from the moment it was finished. "I rehearsed a proposal for that album to my label," he said. "I had Boston's *Boston*, Fleetwood Mac's *Rumours* and one more album. I think it was Peter Frampton's *Frampton Comes Alive*. I was going to show them those album covers, and then show *No Fences*. I felt like that was the class the album was in."

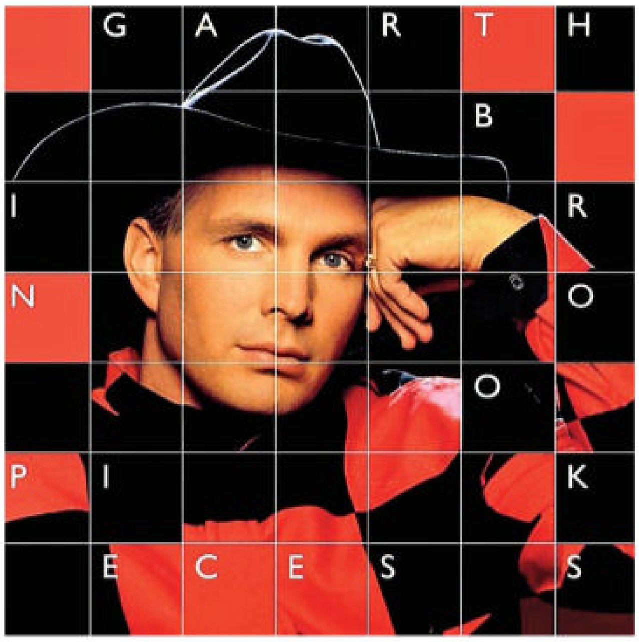
GARTH
BROOKS
ROPIN' THE WIND

3. *Ropin' the Wind*, 1991
"Papa Loves Mama" was slated to be this album's first single, but it was replaced by "Rodeo." For its second, Billy Joel's "Shameless," Brooks accomplished the tricky task of turning a rock ballad into a country No. 1. *Ropin' the Wind* became only the second country album in history (after *Kenny Rogers' Greatest Hits*) to reach the top of the pop charts.

LIVE FROM NEW YORK
Brooks was the musical guest on *Saturday Night Live* (John Goodman was the host) on March 14, 1992, during the NBC show's 17th season.

GARTH BROOKS
The Chase

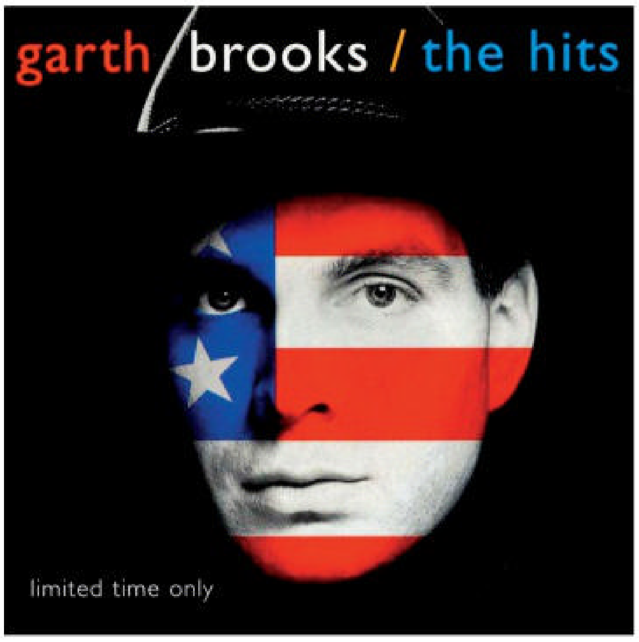
4. *The Chase*, 1992
The album opens with "We Shall Be Free," Brooks' troubled yet hopeful response to watching the L.A. riots on TV. This more serious tone is felt across much of the record. Brooks says it reflects the fact that it was recorded during one of the most trying times of his life. Artistically, things turned out well. He now considers the songwriting on the album's 11 tracks to be the best of any of his records.



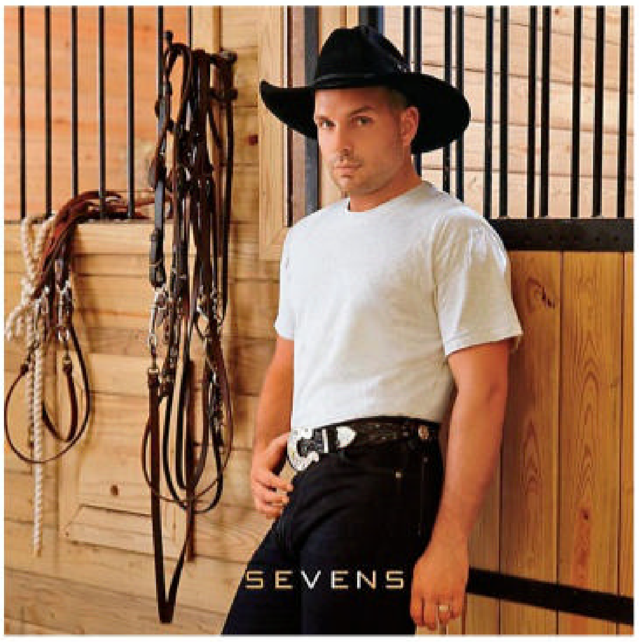
5. *In Pieces*, 1993
This album is the sound of Brooks and his band hitting their stride. A month after its release, backstage at the CMA Awards, he summed up his new attitude toward making country music: "It's not rocket science. It's about raising hell and having fun." High-energy live favorites "Callin' Baton Rouge," "American Honky-Tonk Bar Association" and "Ain't Going Down (Til the Sun Comes Up)" all bear that out.

Pearl
Takamine

ACTIVE VOICE
In April 1994, eight months after the release of *In Pieces*—his sixth studio album—Brooks performed in Dublin, Ireland, during his world tour.



6. *The Hits*, 1994
Brooks asked his label to hold off on releasing *The Hits* because he feared it would dilute sales of his studio albums. It was eventually put out in time for Christmas, then later taken out of print. It also came with a medley of 61 tracks from his discography, the master copy of which is buried under Brooks' star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame.

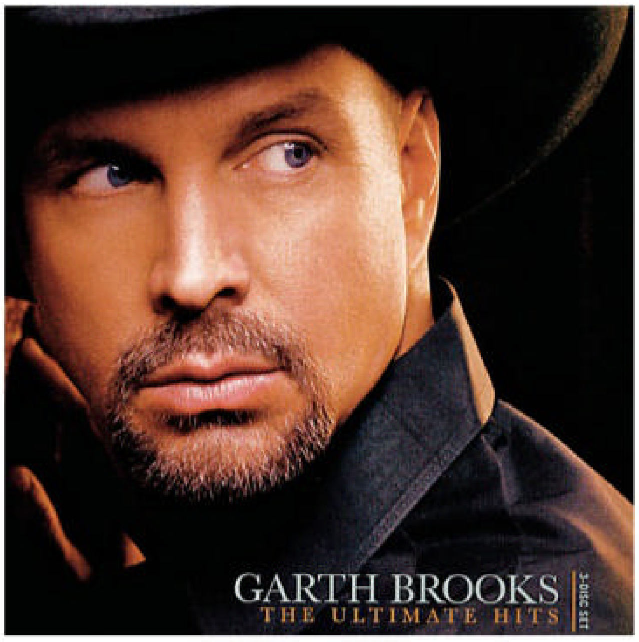


7. *Sevens*, 1997
The album came on the heels of Brooks' free 1997 concert in New York's Central Park. *Sevens* sold 3.4 million copies in its first five weeks and included fan favorites "Longneck Bottle," "Two Piña Coladas" and the Trisha Yearwood duet, "In Another's Eyes." Brooks' favorite was "Belleau Wood," which he adapted from a poem about enemy soldiers singing together on the battlefields of World War I.

DOUBLE LIVE
GARTH BROOKS
2 CD SET

8. *Double Live*, 1998

The record, the first to sell a million copies in its first week, was the culmination of 32 months on the road, during which time Brooks played 347 shows in 99 cities for 5 million fans. The tour was one of the top-grossing road shows of all time, even though tickets could be had for only $20. *Double Live* captured the spirit of those shows as well as an album could, especially on the stretched-out version of "Friends in Low Places."



9. *The Ultimate Hits*, 2007

After six years of retirement, Brooks was back at the center of country music, thanks to *The Ultimate Hits*. Its 34 tracks stand as a monument to one of the most remarkable careers in the genre's history. Its new recordings held up pretty well, too: One of them, "More Than a Memory," became his 18th No. 1 hit.

PHILLY SOUL
Just two months before the release of *Double Live*, Brooks played a show in Philadelphia on Sept. 9, 1998.

CHAPTER 4

It took some time, but Brooks ultimately married his best friend

GARTH & TRISHA

At an event in Dallas, Brooks and Yearwood share a kiss onstage on April 17, 2015. The two have been married since 2005, but their close friendship dates back to the 1980s.

CHAPTER 4

★ ★ ★

I'M BEGINNING THE NEXT STAGE

of my life with my best friend beside me," Garth Brooks said in 2006, talking about his recent wedding. "My new goal is to be known as Mr. Trisha Yearwood."

Brooks and Yearwood married on Dec. 10, 2005, at their home in Owasso, Oklahoma. But their story begins back in the 1980s, when they both were singing on a demo for songwriter Kent Blazy. Yearwood was paid $10 for her work. Brooks got nothing. "We hit it off," Yearwood remembered. "But I had no idea he'd turn out to be Garth Brooks!"

For Brooks, the chemistry was immediate but also troubling. "I had been married 13 months when I met her. When someone said, 'What'd you think when you met her?' I said, 'I felt like I just met my wife.'"

At the time, his wife was Sandy Mahl, a fellow Oklahoman who had moved to Nashville to help Brooks break into the music industry. They were college sweethearts—with a twist. Their meet-cute took place not at a pep rally or dormitory, but at a bar where Brooks was working as a bouncer. One night he was called to break up a fight, and Mahl was one of the women fighting. Together they eventually had three children—Taylor, August and Allie—before separating in 2000.

Taylor, the oldest, was born in 1992, and from the moment he became a father Brooks worked to be as

VOCAL PAIRING
Brooks and Yearwood perform together—as they often do—during the Country Music Hall of Fame Medallion Ceremony in Nashville on Oct. 25, 2015.

TWO PERFECT
A month after going public as a couple, Brooks and Yearwood (left, top, in 1999) attended an event in Beverly Hills, California (left, bottom), in April 2002.

PAS DE DUET
On Sept. 11, 1997, Yearwood and Brooks went on *The Tonight Show with Jay Leno* (right) in Burbank, California, to perform their song, "In Another's Eyes."

NEBRASKA
15
BASKETBALL

> "THEY TOURED TOGETHER AND SHE SANG BACKING VOCALS ON HIS RECORDS."

active in his daughters' lives as possible. "I know my mom and dad didn't have money to give their kids," he reflected just after her birth. "I know that. But the one thing they did have was time and attention. And that made me feel like I was very important to someone. That is what I must give my little girl. The fact that we have millions of dollars means nothing to her."

After the divorce, Brooks built a new house across the road from Mahl, and the two shared custody of their daughters. They decided not to hire nannies. For Brooks, who was used to spending much of the year on the road, this was a big transition.

"I was living with three strange women that I did not know. They were 8, 6 and 4," he remembered. "I was about to get a crash course in females ... and my best friend showed up."

That best friend was Trisha Yearwood—"Ms. Yearwood," as Brooks still refers to her. Throughout the '90s, the two remained friends. They toured together, and she sang backing vocals on his records. She went through her own divorce in 1999, and during the recording of Brooks' album *Scarecrow* in 2001, they

HIWATT

LAUGHING MATTER
Yearwood and Brooks share a lighter moment while performing her song "Powerful Thing" at the American Music Awards in Los Angeles on Jan. 11, 1999.

CLASPED HANDS
Brooks and Yearwood performing onstage in Las Vegas at the 43rd Annual Academy of Country Music Awards on May 18, 2008 (below).

HOMESTATE HEROES
In June 2013, a month after a tornado killed 24 people in Moore, Oklahoma, Brooks and Yearwood performed together at a United Way benefit in Norman (right).

got closer than ever. Eventually they started dating, which they initially kept quiet. But they went public in 2002, showing up to the Nashville funeral of legendary songwriter Harlan Howard arm-in-arm. He proposed to her in front of 7,000 fans at Buck Owens' Crystal Palace, a famous country music venue in Bakersfield, California.

"I've always loved Trisha Yearwood as a friend," Brooks told an interviewer shortly before the November 2001 release of *Scarecrow*. "But then I realized I was falling in love with her ... when I saw how our whole relationship was changing, I was so happy that I worried it was a dream and I might wake up."

They haven't woken up yet. Domestic life—at least their superstar version of it—has gone well for the couple. They blend in with the other parents at youth sporting events, and since the kids have gotten older, the couple returned to touring together, too. Yearwood has published four cookbooks, and she is the star of her own cooking show on the Food Network. One of her most famous recipes is a tortellini-filled breakfast bowl she makes for her husband.

"At the end of the day, even when I'm mad at him, [Garth] listens," Yearwood said. "Even when I think he's not listening to me, he is. And he's kind. He's very generous and he's very thoughtful."

LAHOMA

CHAPTER 5

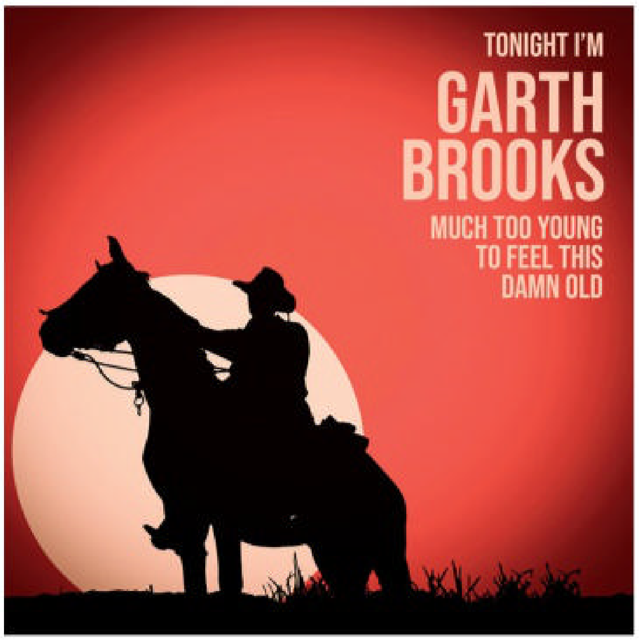
Nine songs that everybody loves

GARTH'S FAN FAVORITES

Brooks cups his hand to his ear to make sure he can hear his fans singing along to his music during the iHeartRadio Music Awards in Los Angeles on March 14, 2019.

Dean Markley

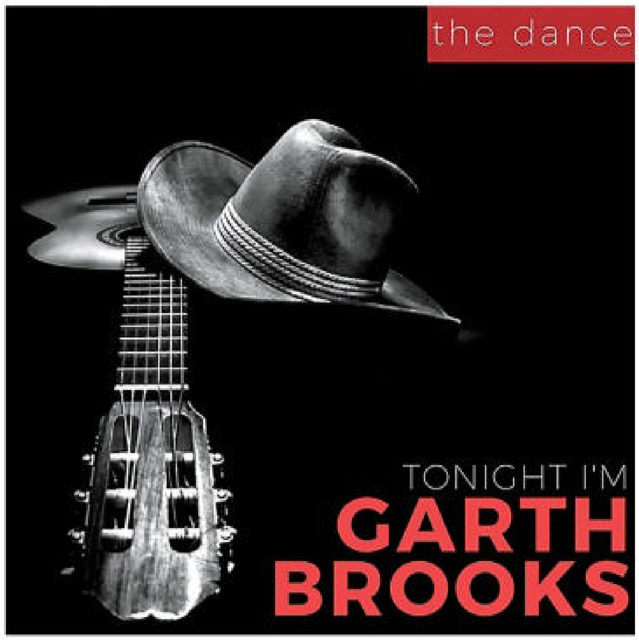
COUNTRY HEARTBEAT Brooks sends a message of love to his fans from onstage in Philadelphia during his world tour on March 24, 2017.



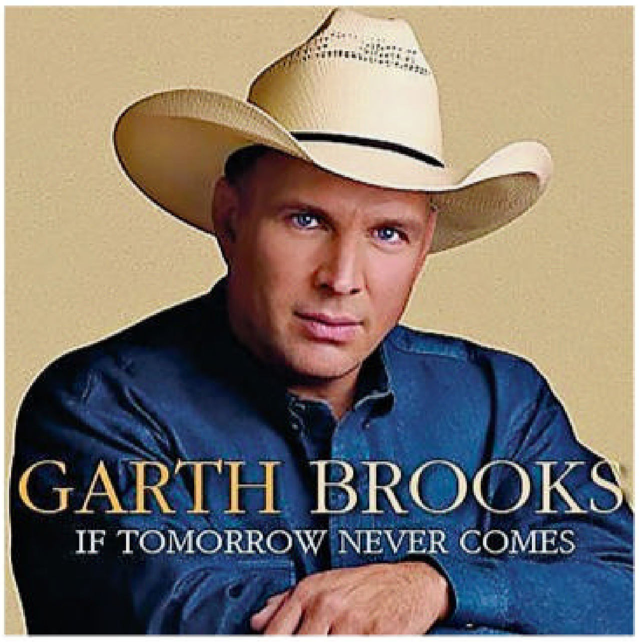
1. "Much Too Young (To Feel This Damn Old)"
Chris LeDoux, the rodeo champion and country singer mentioned in the lyrics, said he almost drove his car off the road the first time he heard the song on the radio. He and Brooks eventually became friends, and in 1992 they collaborated on "Whatcha Gonna Do With a Cowboy," the biggest single of LeDoux's career.

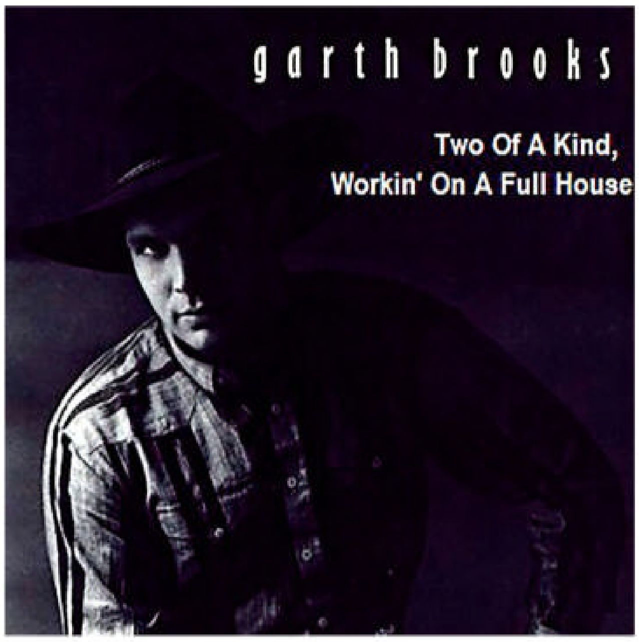
GARTH BROOKS
THE RIVER

2. "The River"
Brooks has received more fan mail about "The River" than any of his other songs. "I would rather have one song that was from the heart than eight songs that were clever and went to No. 1 on the charts," he once said. "If I get a song that I feel is on a parallel from my heart to yours, instead of coming from my mouth to your ears, then I think I've got something."



3. "The Dance"
Brooks first heard "The Dance" when songwriter Tony Arata sang it at the Bluebird Cafe. "People were very polite when it was over," Brooks said, "and the voice inside me was standing up and screaming, 'Didn't any of you hear what I heard?'" The end result, a ballad about loving without regret, was named the best country song of all time by *Country Weekly*.





4. "If Tomorrow Never Comes"
Brooks' first No. 1 hit. This song was inspired in part by the unexpected deaths of two close friends from Oklahoma, but it took on new meaning when his relationship with his first wife Sandy was on the rocks. On his first tour, away from home at a show in Cape Girardeau, Missouri, he wept onstage when he attempted to sing the song. The band had to restart it from the top.

5. "Two of a Kind, Workin' on a Full House"
"Two of a Kind" was written in part by Warren Haynes, who's best known as a guitarist in the Allman Brothers Band and Gov't Mule. He's said that Brooks' recording is one of the things he's most proud of in his songwriting career: "I love the fact that he can step from one musical style to another with ease and never lose the authenticity of any of it."

G IS FOR GREAT
Brooks (center, with white guitar) performs onstage at Bridgestone Arena in Nashville during the 51st CMA Awards on Nov. 8, 2017.

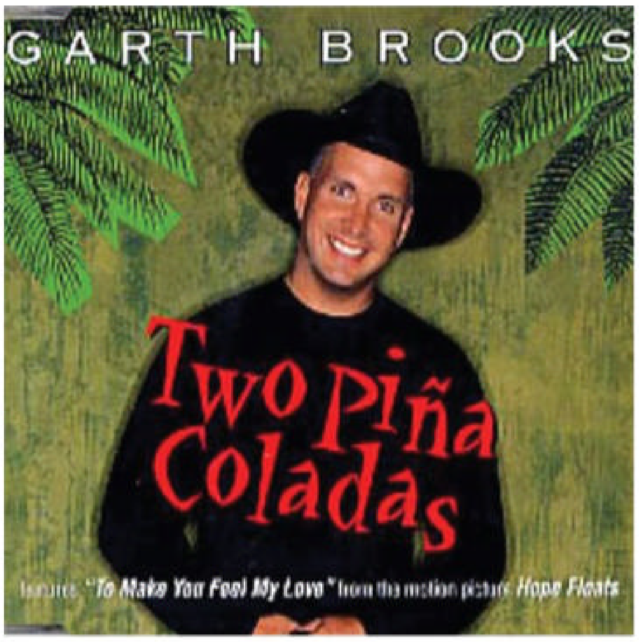
YAMAHA
MATCHLESS

CROWD CONTROL
Brooks pumps up his fans while singing his hits at the 43rd Academy of Country Music Awards at the MGM Grand in Las Vegas on May 18, 2008.

GARTH BROOKS
AIN'T GOING DOWN
(TIL THE SUN COMES UP)

6. “Ain’t Going Down (Til the Sun Comes Up)”

At the writing session for this up-tempo barn burner, Brooks told his co-writers that he wanted something with “shotgun lyrics.” Said Kent Blazy: “Once we got the title, he had the complete picture in his head. He knew how the lines would come—fast and furious at the listener.” It was the first single off *In Pieces*.


GARTH BROOKS
Two Piña Coladas
features "To Make You Feel My Love" from the motion picture Hope Floats

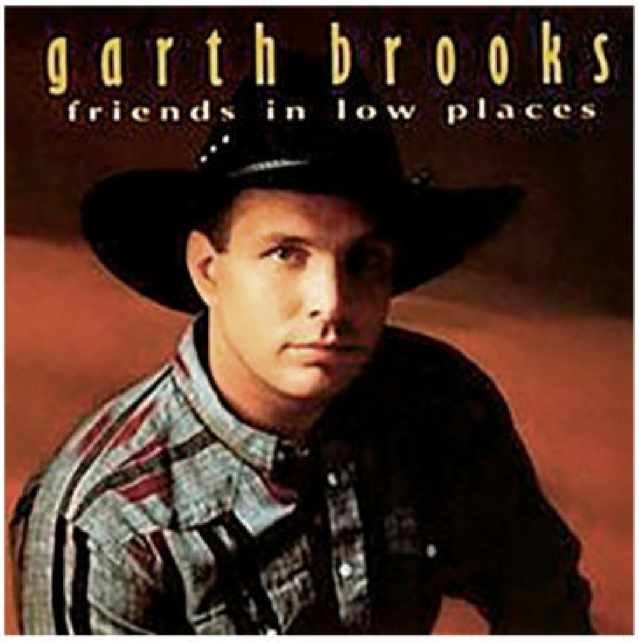
7. “Two Piña Coladas”

The track is a perfect Margaritaville sing-along. Which is why it’s surprising that it was written on a rainy February day in Nashville. Shawn Camp, one of the song’s three writers, suggested that he and his partners skip town for Florida. “Well, if I go to Florida, I want a piña colada,” said co-writer Sandy Mason. “Well, I want one for each hand!” said Benita Hill. A No. 1 country hit was born.

garth brooks / the thunder rolls

8. “The Thunder Rolls”

This song tells the story of a woman who discovers that her husband is cheating on her. At shows, Brooks often adds a fourth verse where the woman retaliates by shooting him with a pistol. This was depicted in the song’s music video, which was banned by The Nashville Network and Country Music Television. “They want to see the good side of real life [and] turn their backs on the bad,” Brooks said of the networks.



9. “Friends in Low Places”

Bud Lee tossed off the phrase “I’ve got friends in low places” at lunch with fellow Nashville songwriter Dewayne Blackwell when they both realized they couldn’t pay the tab. Feeling a chill go up his spine, Lee asked, “Is this a song?” Blackwell replied, “Not yet.” When they finished the tune a year later, they knew they’d written a hit.

CHORUS LEADER
A black-hatted Brooks leads the crowd in a sing-along during his set at the Musicians Hall of Fame ceremony in Nashville on Oct. 22, 2019.

Dean Markley
Takamine

UNIVERSAL STUDIOS Hollywood
26th Annual ACADEMY of COUNTRY MUSIC AWARDS
NBC

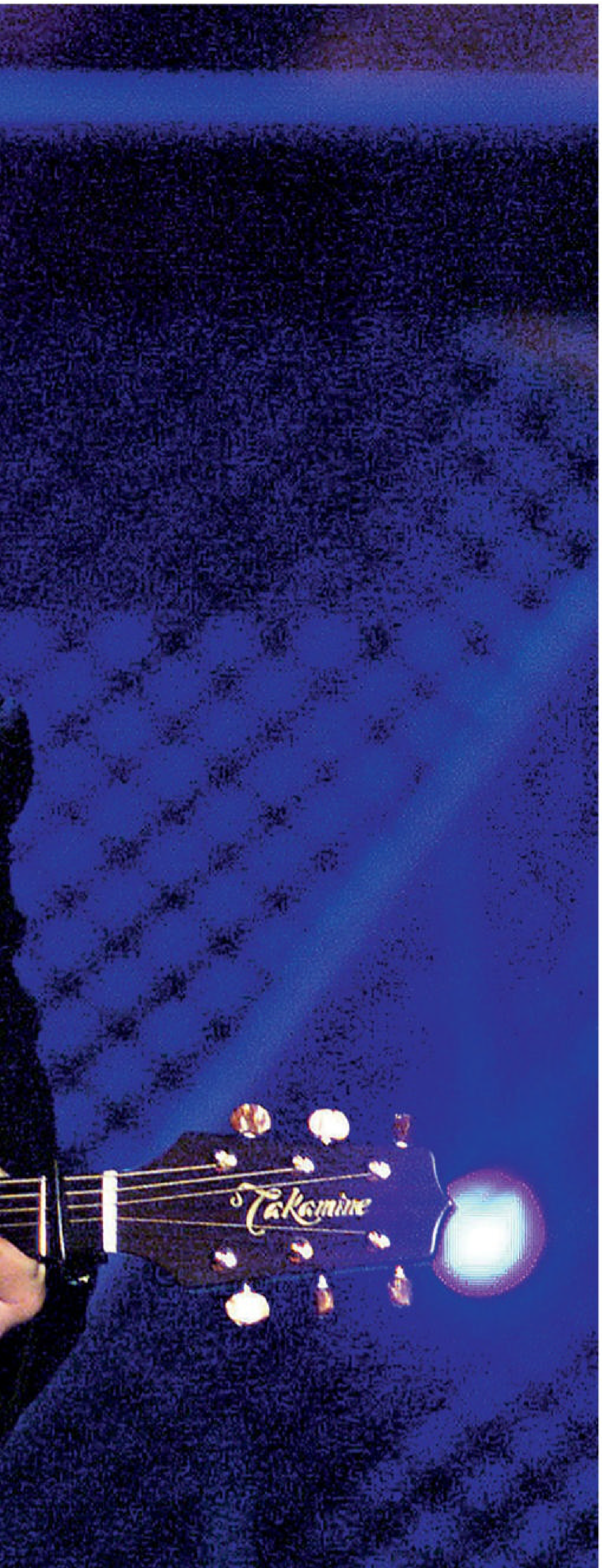
CHAPTER 6

At the peak of success, Brooks took a pause to find balance

WALKING OUT AND STORMING BACK

Brooks holding his record haul of six trophies at the Academy of Country Music Awards in Universal City, California, on April 24, 1991. Among his wins, the ceremony's highest honor: Entertainer of the Year.

GOLDEN MIKE
Brooks performs at the Academy of Country Music Awards on Sept. 23, 1998, at the Grand Ole Opry, in Nashville, where he was named Artist of the Year.



EVEN WHEN HE WAS

at the top of the music world, Garth Brooks always kept success at a distance. “Garth is supposedly the biggest-selling solo act in the United States,” he explained. “I can’t say I am.” Sometimes, he felt like his life was split in two. “There’s GB the artist,” he continued, but that was separate from “Garth the lazy guy just hanging around the house.”

The identity crisis had begun with the runaway success of his first two albums, and by the end of the 1990s, it had started to make its way into his music. In 1999, he released *Garth Brooks in ... the Life of Chris Gaines,* an experimental Greatest Hits album in which Brooks took on the persona of a fictitious Australian rock star with long hair and a soul patch. He promoted the record on *Saturday Night Live,* hosting as himself, while also playing the part of Chris Gaines as the show’s musical guest.

Just before the record’s release, Brooks had lost his mother, Colleen, leading him to further contemplate the direction of his life. That December, he announced he was taking a break. He told The Nashville Network that he wanted a year off to be with his family. Then, in October 2000, at a press conference before a black-tie party celebrating his 100 millionth album sold, he officially called it quits.

The best way he could explain his decision was to tell reporters about one of his daughter’s recent soccer games. He said he’d had more fun there than in the previous 10 years of touring. Garth promised one more album—2001’s chart-topping

...chris gaines
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POP TRIO
Brooks between Chris Gaines collaborators Kenneth "Babyface" Edmonds (far left) and Don Was (near left) in Hollywood, California, on May 10, 1999.

BUSY RETIREMENT
On Jan. 13, 2002, Brooks won a People's Choice Award (right, bottom). In 2015, he sang at a 100th birthday tribute to Frank Sinatra (right, top).

> "THE IDENTITY CRISIS HAD BEGUN WITH THE RUNAWAY SUCCESS OF HIS FIRST TWO ALBUMS."

People's Choice Awards

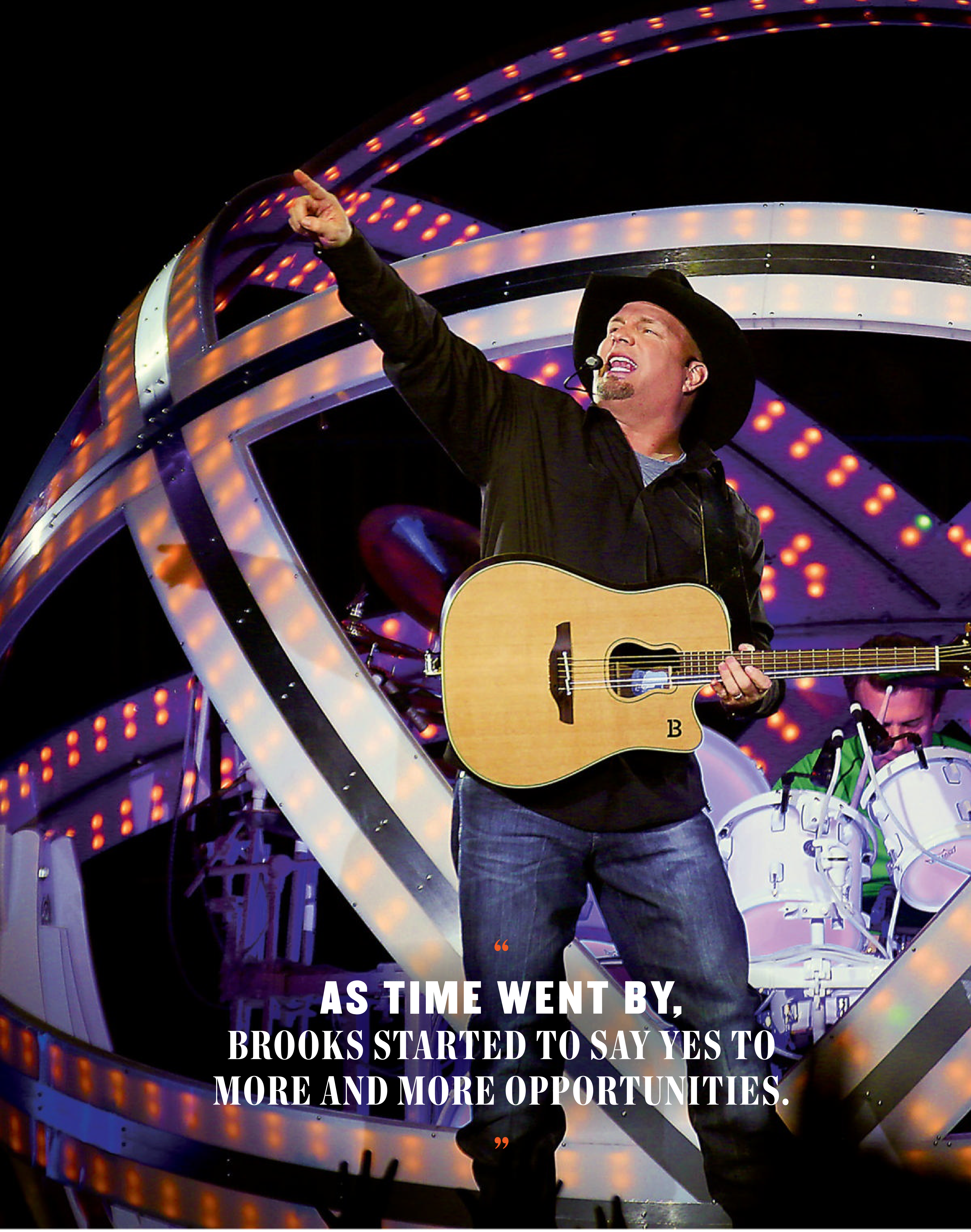
Scarecrow—before making the transition to becoming a "dad who occasionally sings."

In doing so, he said he was living up to a promise he'd made eight years earlier to his daughter Taylor when she was an infant. "I said, 'Look, by the time you're 6 years old, that's when school starts, I'll be done,'" he told the *Nashville Tennessean*. "I missed it by two years."

Brooks may have left the scene, but he wasn't quite out. In 2005, Walmart approached him about the possibility of releasing a new album of outtakes. He liked the idea and capped the project with one new song, a tribute to his old friend Chris LeDoux called "Good Ride Cowboy." The deal also made Walmart the exclusive retailer for Brooks' back catalog.

It was a fit for everyone involved. Brooks had long admired the retailer. Over a decade earlier, when asked why he kept his concert ticket prices so low, Brooks told a reporter, "I believe in the Walmart school of business. The less people pay for a product ... the happier they are with it."

As time went by, Brooks started to say yes to more and more opportunities. In 2007, he played



“AS TIME WENT BY, BROOKS STARTED TO SAY YES TO MORE AND MORE OPPORTUNITIES.”

CHAPTER 6

CALL IT A COMEBACK
On Sept. 19, 2014—16 days after the release of his comeback single, "People Loving People"—Brooks performed in Atlanta.

nine sold-out shows at Kansas City's newly opened Sprint Center. The following January, he played five sold-out shows in less than 48 hours at L.A.'s Staples Center, raising money for wildfire response.

More and more opportunities came along. Brooks officially put his retirement on hiatus to begin a weekend residency at Wynn Las Vegas. With the help of Steve Wynn's private jet, he and Trisha Yearwood would fly to Vegas on Friday and return home to Oklahoma on Sunday night. This was Brooks' condition to Wynn: He would only do the shows if he could still bring his daughters to school every morning.

The residency continued into 2014. By the end of the year, he'd released a new album and begun a world tour. He was not only back, but also back on top. The tour was the highest grossing in country music, and at the 2016 CMA Awards he earned Entertainer of the Year, the highest honor in Nashville.

At the ceremony, Brooks was grateful and full of energy—his signature combination. When his name was called, he hugged the other nominees as he made his way to the stage. "We are so damn lucky to be part of this thing called country music," he told the crowd, holding the trophy high above his head. It was safe to say that retirement had officially ended.

SPECIAL APPEARANCE
Brooks (above, left) jams with guitarist Bruce Bouton at the new Sprint Center in Kansas City, Missouri, on Nov. 6, 2007. It was the second of his nine shows at the venue.

BACK ON TOP
Brooks doffs his hat in tribute at the 50th Annual CMA Awards in Nashville on Nov. 2, 2016 (right). Two years after his comeback, he was named Entertainer of the Year.

AW

Takamine

CHAPTER 7

Brooks has never been quiet about his causes and beliefs

CLOSE TO THE HEART

On March 4, 2020, Brooks received the Gershwin Prize for Popular Song at Constitution Hall in Washington, D.C. At 58, he was the youngest-ever recipient of the prestigious award.

CHAPTER 7

GARTH BROOKS SAT WITH his songwriting partner Stephanie Davis at his farm outside Nashville. They were working on a new song, but neither had a guitar in their hands. For Brooks, the lyrics were so important that he didn't want any instruments distracting them. He had recently watched the Los Angeles riots unfold on TV, and he was troubled by what he'd seen. As a response, he decided to write a song about how people might someday come together. It was a vision of the world he wanted to leave for his children. Davis came up with the title for it: "We Shall Be Free."

Released in August 1992, "We Shall Be Free" was the first Garth Brooks single not to enter the top 10—yet it would still become one of his signature songs. For radio, the problem came down to one line: "When we're free to love anyone we choose…" Brooks sang, "Then we shall be free."

On prime-time TV, Barbara Walters asked him if the lyric was a show of support for gay couples. He said yes. "I'm sorry," he told Walters. "I just can't condemn somebody for being happy and loving someone else."

For many, this public stance came as a surprise. Shouldn't a popular country singer, still early in his career, play it a little safer? Not Brooks. Since entering the public eye in the late '80s, he has proven himself to be someone who stands up for what he believes in, even when it's unpopular. At his heart,

DYNAMITE DUO
Blake Shelton (near right) performed onstage with Brooks (center, in black hat) at the 53rd Annual CMA Awards in Nashville on Nov. 13, 2019.

Gift Shop
The Child Life
ZONE
Phoenix Children's Hospital
PHOENIX CHILDREN'S Hospital
FOR CHILDREN

GIVING BACK Brooks with former first lady Rosalynn Carter at a Habitat for Humanity event in 2019 (left, top), and at the 2012 opening of a Child Life Zone in Phoenix (left, bottom).

CELEBRITY BUILDERS Brooks and Yearwood are frequent volunteers with Habitat for Humanity. At right, they pitch in and get dirty building houses in Nashville in October 2019.

> “HE HAS PROVEN HIMSELF TO BE SOMEONE WHO STANDS UP FOR WHAT HE BELIEVES IN.”

he’s a humanist who understands that all people deserve love and respect. He’s a proud American who has sung at two presidential inaugurations, and because of “We Shall Be Free,” he’s a proud recipient of an Outstanding Music Artist from GLAAD.

Brooks’ public support for gay rights was bold, but for those who knew him, it was no surprise. On tour in the ’90s, for instance, he defended backup singer Vicki Hampton—who is Black—against similar prejudice.

“This one person, from I believe it was France, couldn’t understand how country music could have a Black person in it, ’cause they thought that’s what country music was against,” he said. “And man, when you hear that, man, your skin just crawls and you just get all tensed up and you wanna pop somebody, until you realize that’s what you’re out there for—to educate people on that stuff.”

Garth’s commitment to making the world a better place extends to his charity work. Brooks donates money extensively, but more than that, he shows up. He and Trisha Yearwood aren’t just big donors to Habitat for Humanity, they also get their hands dirty building houses for the organization. After

Habitat for Humanity
RAMASE LAJAN

CHAPTER 7

CRY FREEDOM
At the inauguration of President Barack Obama on Jan. 18, 2009, Brooks—backed by a gospel choir—performed "We Shall Be Free" at the Lincoln Memorial.

IN THIS TEMPLE
AS IN THE HEARTS OF THE PEC
FOR WHOM HE SAVED THE UN
THE MEMORY OF ABRAHAM LINC
IS ENSHRINED FOREVER

PUCK DYNASTY
In July 2002, Brooks (below, front row, center) posed with NHL players (back row) and children from his Teammates for Kids Foundation at a charity event in Las Vegas.

FIELD OF DREAMS
When he joined the San Diego Padres as an outfielder for spring training in 1999 (right), Brooks donated his salary to Teammates for Kids.

Hurricane Katrina, they traveled to New Orleans to get involved with the relief effort, helping to build the 1,000th and 1,001st new Habitat home in the city. They did the same after the 2010 earthquake in Haiti.

Teammates for Kids is the primary outlet for Brooks' philanthropy. Founded by Brooks and his friend Bo Mitchell in 1999, the organization has raised over $80 million. They fund local charities, put on sports camps around the country, and host leadership classes for middle-school girls. At hospitals across the United States and Canada, they've built 13 "Child Life Zones" that establish therapeutic play areas for kids undergoing procedures.

More than 4,000 athletes have joined Teammates in some way, whether donating a portion of their salaries or volunteering their time at sports camps or Child Life Zones. Brooks launched the charity after indulging in one of his own athletic dreams, joining the San Diego Padres' spring training roster and donating his salary to charity.

For Brooks, the work creates its own sort of music. "At some point you have to stop and just listen," he said about working for Habitat in New Orleans. "The hammering of these hundreds and hundreds of hammers... you know what they're doing? They're building love, man. And it's the greatest feeling on the planet."

CHAPTER 8

How will Garth Brooks be remembered in the vast history of country music?

HIS LEGACY

Brooks was named Entertainer of the Year at the 50th Annual CMA Awards in Nashville on Nov. 2, 2016. Brooks holds the record for the award with seven wins.

FORTUNATE SON Brooks performs "All American Kid" onstage at AT&T Stadium in Arlington, Texas, during the Academy of Country Music Awards on April 19, 2015.

★ ★ ★

GARTH BROOKS HAS WON

a staggering number of awards—especially for a career that's not even close to over. He's been nominated for 14 Grammys and won two. He's been nominated for 21 American Music Awards and won 17. He's been nominated for 23 Billboard Music Awards and won 19. The Academy of Country Music has nominated him an astounding 49 times. He won 23 of those, earning 10 Entertainer of the Year trophies and an Artist of the Decade award in 1998. At the Country Music Association Awards, meanwhile, he's earned 31 nominations and 19 trophies, including seven wins for Entertainer of the Year. No one else has more than four.

Brooks has been inducted into the Country Hall of Fame, the Songwriters Hall of Fame, the Musicians Hall of Fame and, for good measure, the Cheyenne Frontier Days Hall of Fame. The Library of Congress gave him the prestigious Gershwin Prize for Popular Song in 2020, the same year he was an honoree of the Kennedy Center.

The sales figures surpass even those honors. Brooks has nine RIAA-certified Diamond records—albums selling over 10 million copies—more than anyone in history, regardless of musical style. His total album sales are well over 150 million. By some calculations this puts him behind only The Beatles on the list of the bestselling artists of all time.

Brooks, for his part, takes all of this in stride. "I'm never going to be on The Beatles' [level] in my mind," he has said. "If I am to someone else out there, thank you, that's flattering, but I'll never believe it."

MUSICIANS

MEDAL HALL
On Oct. 26, 2016, Brooks was inducted into the Musicians Hall of Fame in Nashville (left). He is an inductee of three other Halls of Fame.

BOUNDARY BUSTER
Brooks with Billy Joel (far right, top) at the Songwriters Hall of Fame in 2011, and with fellow country singer Jon Pardi (near right, bottom) at the 2019 CMA Awards.

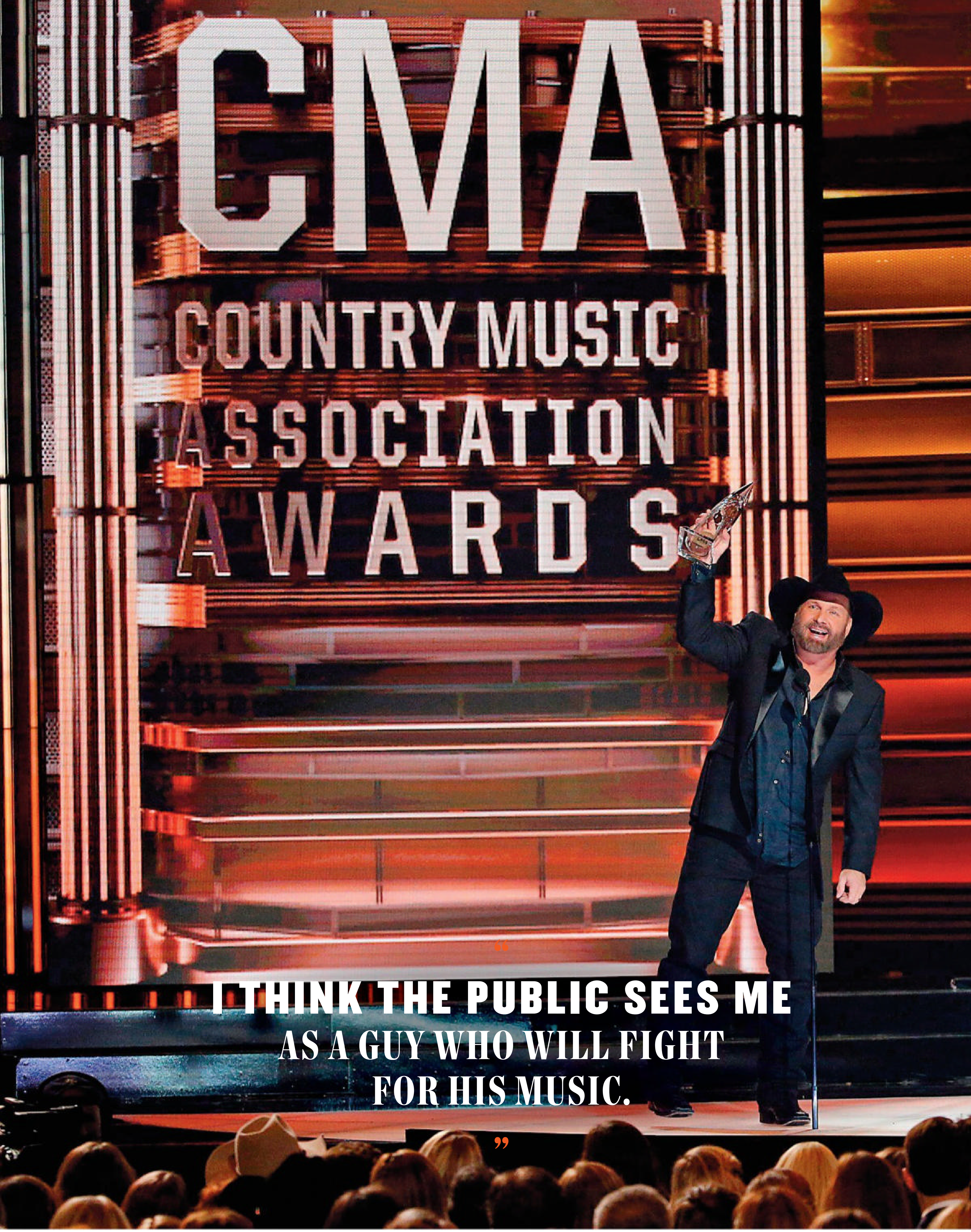
> “THE STATISTICS MAY PROVIDE A KIND OF VALIDATION, BUT THEY WERE NEVER THE POINT.”

The statistics may provide a kind of validation, but they were never the point. “I have always said that we make music for no other reason than making music. You don’t want to be remembered just for how many units you’ve sold. You want to be remembered for your music.”

Fortunately for Brooks, his music holds up pretty well. His lyrics remain deeply personal and empathetic. Songs such as “The River,” “The Dance,” “That Summer” and “Unanswered Prayers” depict everyday life as being filled with drama, passion and yearning. They invite the listener in, offering characters and feelings that people from all backgrounds can identify with.

These lyrics are set to music that combines old-school honky-tonk with the high-end production and fresh guitar riffs influenced by the rock records Brooks has always loved. The combination changed country music, ushering in a new era of creativity and introducing a new generation of listeners to the genre. His success reverberated throughout Nashville.

“Out of all the artists I’ve worked with, he’s the most loyal person,” songwriter Kent Blazy has said.


CMA
COUNTRY MUSIC
ASSOCIATION
AWARDS

> "I THINK THE PUBLIC SEES ME AS A GUY WHO WILL FIGHT FOR HIS MUSIC."

REPEAT AFTER ME
Brooks won his second straight (and sixth overall) Entertainer of the Year Award from the Country Music Association in Nashville on Aug. 11, 2017.

"And there's a trickle-down effect that comes from what he's done by selling 100 million albums. You've got realtors doing better, car salesmen doing better, interior decorators doing better." When Brooks first retired, one newspaper announced a new era in country music: "A.G." for "After Garth."

When Brooks returned, his fans welcomed him back with open arms. Pollstar, a publication that tracks concert revenue, named Brooks the Country Touring Artist of the Decade for the 2010s. The foundation for that success was laid back in the '90s, when Brooks kept his ticket prices around $15, well below market price. Keeping his concerts affordable, Brooks built a unique connection with his audience.

Country fans follow their favorite artists closely, so when it comes to Brooks, they see how much heart, care and intensity he puts into his work. That's something he's always appreciated and never taken for granted. When asked about how the public perceives him, Brooks hit on exactly this point: "I think the public sees me as a guy who will fight for his music."

Throughout his career, Garth Brooks has not always just fought the good fight—he has won it.

SHOW STOPPER
Brooks pauses to connect with fans while performing at the 52nd Annual CMA Awards at Bridgestone Arena in Nashville on Nov. 14, 2018 (above).

RISING ABOVE
Brooks lifts his arm during a high point in his performance at the 50th Annual CMA Awards in Nashville on Nov. 2, 2016 (right).

GARTH BROOKS

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GARTH BROOKS

From his early days as a college athlete turned bar-band singer, to his meteoric rise in the 1990s, to his current life as a living legend, Garth Brooks has never lost his gratitude for being able to perform. He considers making music an honor *and* a privilege, a special kind of love he shares with audiences around the world whenever he approaches a microphone.